

BOOK REVIEW

Niklas Luhmann 2008. *Ideenevolution. Beiträge zur Wissenssoziologie*. Edited by André Kieserling. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 258 pp. ISBN: 978-3-518-29470-3

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The sociology of knowledge was one of Niklas Luhmann's (1927–1998) main fields of work. Above all, he was interested in the changes in ideas and concepts that arose with the formation of modern society. He explored this research interest in his book series *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik* (1980, 1981, 1989, and 1995), wherein he published main theoretical texts and a number of case studies on the evolution of societal structures and semantics. However, a few texts that Luhmann wrote in this context in the early 1980s were not released in the third volume of the series as initially planned. This was because a study on the modern semantics of love, which was also designed to be a part of this volume, evolved into a book.¹ Following this, the series lasted until 1989, when Luhmann completed the third volume, but it contained only texts that were produced in the second half of the 1980s. André Kieserling, the editor of the book reviewed here, presumes in his short afterword that the author simply did not want to present “outdated” papers (p. 254). In the end, three texts were never released as part of *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik* as originally intended. One of them was a part of another edited volume, another one was posthumously issued only as a shortened version, and the third was not published at

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all. The volume *Ideenevolution* now collocates these three texts, supplemented by two other chapters that also deal with the history of ideas.

As in all his fields of work, Luhmann made high demands also in the sociology of knowledge:

If one does not go beyond *all previous work* in theory construction, and very far beyond, it is better to leave the field of sociology (p. 247).²

Indeed, he ventured beyond the conventional limits: He grounded his work on a radical new version of systems theory (functional structuralism with self-referential systems in contrast to Talcott Parsons' structural functionalism with open systems) and integrated a theory of sociocultural evolution. With regard to the history of ideas, he correspondingly argued for an "alteration from propositions on social groups and strata to propositions on the differentiation of systems and on evolution."³ This implied a focus on the shift from stratificatory to functional differentiation as the primary form of societal differentiation. Herein, Luhmann identified the main characteristics of the formation of modern society.

These conceptual foundations, which were outlined in the first *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik* volume, are reflected in the contributions of the reviewed book. As its title, *Ideenevolution*, suggests, the chapters address the development of semantics. The first contribution, *Sinn, Selbstreferenz und soziokulturelle Evolution*, was published for the first time in full length. It offers systematic considerations of a theory of sociocultural evolution, that is, the evolution of meaning (*Sinn*). Whereas variation, selection, and restabilization are identified as the core mechanisms of evolution, meaning is characterized as the central element of all social communication. It allows for or even provokes evolutionary developments analogous with the organic evolution in biology, because it characteristically marks a "difference of the real and the imaginable [...]. Insofar, meaning is only a continuation of evolution by other means" (pp. 15, 23). Luhmann emphasizes the very central relevance of chance for evolution and rejects the idea of the purposeful development of society. However, he observes that in a general context, societal evolution since the eighteenth century can be considered to have led to more complexity. On the basis of these foundations, Luhmann deploys the hypothesis that society has differentiated societal structures and semantics as two co-evolving

interacting meaning systems. This arrangement enables semantics “to act upon the society as if from outside, for example, in the form of critique or stimulating optimism,” (p. 48) while being part of the society. Semantics not only reflect the current societal structures but also develop and test new ideas, models, or patterns; further, they pass on some obsolete, outdated ones. Therefore, the differentiation of societal structures and semantics – itself an evolutionary achievement – has given rise to ample scope for evolutionary opportunities of the society as a whole. At the end of the chapter, Luhmann applies his considerations on the concept of sociocultural evolution and provides a brief outline of how this idea evolved in the social sciences since the nineteenth century.

This fundamental theoretical text is followed by three case studies on specific evolutionary phenomena: social classes, science, and rationality. The second chapter, *Zum Begriff der sozialen Klasse*, deals with the history of the term *social class*. Luhmann reconstructs two lines of its development. The first one is based on the observation of multidimensional unequal distribution of goods between different social groups. Multidimensionality means that the advantages or disadvantages in one dimension (e.g., economics) correlate with similar effects in other dimensions (education, prestige, and so on). The second line is related to the problem of *subjective* individuality against determination by the *objective* positioning of the individual in modern society arising from one’s social class. Following these two lines, Luhmann reconstructs the development of the term *social class* since the eighteenth century from the Physiocrats via the early theorists of socialism until the time of Karl Marx. Luhmann synthesizes this development into a definition of social class as “the distribution of distributions. It describes the reflexivity of the distribution process (and that means its variability as well)” (p. 90). Hence, this term is an integral part of the self-description of modern society. It differs from the older idea of strata in two points: Classes are perceived as contingent and therefore alterable, and they are not transitively arranged and do not regulate the interaction between people. Even if members of the higher classes

go shopping, they shop as anybody would shop. When they love, they love as anybody would love. It is just about more expensive objects and prettier partners. (p. 94)

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In Luhmann's view, this fact proves the hypothesis that modern society shall not be understood as a class society but as a functionally differentiated society. Multidimensional unequal distribution (i.e., social classes) still exists because functional differentiation does not regulate distribution questions. Therefore, the concept of classes evolves simultaneously with the rearrangement of society from stratificatory to functional differentiation. However, classes are no longer central for how the society works. Therefore, one "can understand the specific semantic career of the term *class* by means of the functional differentiation theory, but not vice versa" (p. 128).

The next chapter, *Die Ausdifferenzierung von Erkenntnisgewinn: Zur Genese von Wissenschaft*, is devoted to the emergence of science as an autonomous system. Luhmann outlines the changes in societal structure and semantics since the second half of the seventeenth century that enabled and supported this development. First, owing to the differentiation of normative and cognitive expectations, innovations were no longer perceived as a danger for the society as a whole. Second, action and experience were differentiated as two forms of attribution. The observation of the world was now conceptualized as experience (and no longer as influencing action), and it led to the *demystification of the world*. Third, the self-referential code *true/false* was introduced, and it thenceforth directed all scientific communication. Finally, the thenceforth autonomous scientific system developed theories on epistemology and science. Luhmann characterizes this last phase (beginning with Immanuel Kant) as a search for *basic aprioris* that could sustain scientific epistemology. In contrast to these concepts, he radically relies on the idea of self-reference and is thereby able to reconstruct the history of science in three stages: the emergence of *basic self-reference*, that is, scientific assertions refer to scientific assertions only; the occurrence of *reflexive processes*, above all the differentiation of theories and methods; and the *reflection of the science's own identity* in the form of epistemology and theory of science.

The fourth chapter, *Rationalität in der modernen Gesellschaft*, is the one that was published for the first time. It outlines the history of the concept of rationality in modern society. Luhmann identifies its core as the "blank idea of correctness" (p. 186). Furthermore, he reconstructs rationality as self-referential, because it "submits itself under its own direction; it defers itself to its own demand for correctness" (p. 187). Thus, the factor that stimulated the development of this term was the danger of tautology. From this point, Luhmann reconstructs the

term's semantic evolution. It started as a concept of a specific human ability, developed a new foundation on *reason* in the age of enlightenment, and finally branched into fragmented semantics of rationality in the nineteenth century. Since then, "modern society did not produce a specific [...] concept of rationality" (p. 202). Instead, we find phenomena like the transfer of rationalization into the future (Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx) focus on pure action rationality (utilitarianism), sociological interest in *rationality damages* (Max Weber), and the differentiation of individual and social rationalities (decision theory, Parsons). The explanation for these semantic developments can be found in the parallel transformation of the societal structure from stratificatory to functional differentiation. Therefore, perspectives of rationality can be developed only for single subsystems of the society. However, Luhmann describes rationality on an abstract level as the "ability of self-observation" (p. 219), that is, the ability of systems to reflect their own boundaries with the environment. Luhmann proposes some ideas about what this could de facto mean; he mentions, among others, *anticipatory mechanisms* that enable the early detection of future dangers (e.g., plants anticipate the cold of the coming winter by means of the changing angle of entry of sunlight). In sum, this chapter provides an interesting and persuasive history of rationality, but the systematic results remain unsatisfactory. Above all, the characterization of rationality as a self-referential term *in contrast* to other terms ("the term bread is not eatable, and the term beauty does not need to be beautiful," (p. 187) is not completely convincing. Shouldn't the words for *beauty* be recognized as beautiful themselves? Moreover, what about terms like logic or truth? Even Luhmann concedes that

all these considerations ought to be completed and continued; they just channel the ways of looking at the problem. They only marginally help to specify the problem of rationality. (pp. 225–226)

It might be that these shortcomings are the reason why the author did not publish this text in his lifetime.

The final chapter, *Ideengeschichte in soziologischer Perspektive*, returns to fundamental theoretical deliberations. However, it is the least-convincing contribution to the reviewed book. Luhmann begins with the identification of two central problems of research on the history of ideas: dealing with the tremendous magnitude of his-

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torical details and facts, and determining adequate epistemological foundations. From this point, Luhmann concludes that the history of ideas comprises infinitely complex and self-referential materials and that research on them is itself a part of this history. Further, he states that the main selective factor in the younger history of ideas is the change of societal complexity, in particular and not surprisingly, the development from stratificatory to functional differentiation. In fact, this constitutes the central idea of how the history of ideas should be practiced in a systems-theoretical perspective. Reading this after the first four chapters of the book (or while being generally acquainted with Luhmann's approach to the sociology of knowledge) is not very fruitful. Undoubtedly, the systems-theoretical view provides meaningful contributions to this research field.⁴ However, this chapter does not provide any further substantial considerations.

Nevertheless, these critical comments do not imply that reading this book is dissatisfying or redundant. Instead, it comprises important supplements to the history of ideas in a systems-theoretical perspective and indicates the productivity of this approach. Beyond this, it is eminently commendable that the volume contains all the contributions of Luhmann to this field of research that, somewhat contingently, did not find their way into the *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik* series owing to specific developments of his work. With regard to future research, further potential first-time publications of the author have attracted interest: The University of Bielefeld, where Luhmann has worked as a professor since 1968, bought his scientific estate in February 2011. This estate includes not only his famous slip box but also a number of unpublished manuscripts.

NOTES

1. Luhmann, Niklas 1982. *Love as Passion. The Codification of Intimacy*. Cambridge: Polity 1986.
2. Emphasis in original; all quotes are translated by the reviewer.
3. Luhmann, Niklas 1980. *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik. Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft 1*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 8.
4. In addition to Luhmann's own case studies, see, for instance, Fischer, Karsten 2010. Hobbes, Schmitt, and the Paradox of Religious Liberality. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, Vol. XIII, Is. 2-3, 399-416; Göbel, Andreas 2005. *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Romantik*. In Thomas Drepper, Andreas Göbel and Hans Nokielski (eds), *Sozialer Wandel und kulturelle Innovation. Historische und systematische Perspektiven*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 163-184.